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THE BETTER BUSINESS LETTERS MOVEMENT

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A notable convention of teachers of English composition was held last October in Worcester, Massachusetts. It was the Better Business Letters Conference, called by invitation of the Norton Company ten days before—the Norton Company manufactures more grinding-wheels than any other concern in the world. The delegates were correspondence supervisors from some one hundred and fifty business houses—busy men whose firms thought this discussion too important to miss.

There were two days of intelligent, stimulating discussion of the problems of business correspondence. It was decided to hold another meeting next fall at Akron, Ohio, and meantime to issue a complete report of the papers and discussions of the Worcester meeting. This report may be obtained for one dollar from Mr. H. N. Rasely, corresponding supervisor of the Norton Company. Every teacher of English composition in high school and college would do well to examine it and keep informed of the movement which it represents. He will find not merely food for thought but suggestions which may be applied in his own sphere of work.

First of all he will be heartened by the importance which the progressive business community—and business is going to count immensely more hereafter in the field of education—attaches to the matter of composition as a direct agency of business life. Well-written letters, business men have learned, mean good operation and profit; poor letters mean inefficiency and waste.

Business houses became seriously concerned, a few years ago, over the cost of their correspondence as then carried on. Letters were going out daily by the thousands, most of them to be dropped into waste baskets unanswered. The situation was grimly illustrated by a story told by a Boston advertising man at the Worcester conference.

A load of coal was pouring through a manhole in a Boston street. A colored man passing stopped and laughed.

"What's the matter?" said the driver. "Funny to see a load o' coal goin' into a cellar?"

"No," said the colored man, "but mighty funny to see a load o' coal goin' into a sewer!"

The three-cent postage law has, of course, quickened the movement for retrenchment, and yet the additional penny adds only a little in proportion. When all factors are counted in, salaries of typists, expense of machines, general overhead charges, the cost of each letter sent out by a big modern business ranges from ten to thirty cents.

The methods of improvement which these progressive houses adopted are most instructive. Large use had been made in recent years of form letters and form paragraphs, run off on manifolded machines and filled in at small cost. But the sense of the Better Business Letters Conference was all away from the form letter. Much of the correspondence of any house—letters adjusting complaints, collecting debts, granting or refusing credit, as well as sales letters themselves—requires the immediate personal touch, no matter how brief. These correspondence supervisors accordingly are trying to prepare not the letter but the letter-writer to train those who have the task of expressing by mail the views of the house, so that their every utterance shall be deft, graceful, and effective. "Some job," is it not?

The methods developed by these business houses may well be studied by the academic teacher of composition, for they work. Their essential feature consists in setting the student one definite, concrete problem after another and directing his attention throughout to the substance—the facts and the ideas involved.

Not that form is neglected. The rules of spelling, punctuation, and grammar must be observed. Certain expressions which are incorrect must not be used—the old-time commercial jargon, it might be stated, is utterly discarded. There are no "Yours received and contents noted" or "We beg to remain."

But the form is a minor matter. The young correspondent must deal with the situation. Here are the circumstances: We

have received a letter in such and such terms from Mr. A——; he wants *this*; we want him to do *that*; so far as we can learn from previous letters or otherwise, *this* is his character. What can you say to him within the limits of a one-page letter to convince him of the reasonableness and desirability of our policy?

A number of books have been made for training business letter-writers according to this formula. Some are by members of college English departments who know business: Gardner of the University of Wisconsin, Hotchkiss of New York University, McJohnson of the University of Illinois, etc. Others are unpublished manuals drawn up by correspondence supervisors themselves for their own office force. In these books one will find many letters actually written by regular correspondents of business houses as part of their day's work which rank very creditably as literature. They have directness, clearness, conciseness, and ease; their style is wholesomely colloquial,

Not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food.

Best of all, they say what they have to say so that it is clear and reasonable to the individual they address.

The following may serve by way of illustration:

*An adjustment letter.*¹

April 24, 1915

The Starboard Company
New York City

Attention Mr. John Doe

GENTLEMEN:

Your letter of April 20 concerning our recent bill for \$6.00 for one of your engravings has been referred to this department for attention. We are very glad to explain the points about which you ask.

After checking up this bill, we have come to the conclusion that it was very likely the charge for Ben Dey gray-down which raised the total to the amount which may have seemed somewhat high to you. You perhaps did not notice that the background of the line engraving is composed of two distinct Ben Dey's, for which the actual engraver's charge to us amounted to \$2.00, besides the charge for the cut itself. In addition to the mortised line engraving with

¹ Hotchkiss, *Business English*, III, 25. New York: The Business Training Corporation.

these two Ben Dey gray-downs there was, blocked in, a silhouette half-tone for which the minimum charge is \$1.50.

With these figures before you, we have no doubt you will appreciate the fairness of our charge. Inclosed you will find engraver's proofs of these two cuts, together with the original invoice, which we trust you will feel perfectly justified in approving.

Very truly yours,

THE AMERICAN TINSMITH,
Manager Sales Promotion Dept.

A sales letter, to the buyer for a printing house.¹

DEAR SIR:

You know paper just as well as we do, so we won't talk quality.

We just want to ask you one question. How can you afford to ignore Benjamin Bond—like this sheet—at seventeen cents a pound?

You can see that the quality compares *favorably* with bonds costing from fifteen to thirty per cent more.

Try Benjamin Bond on a few orders, and give your customers equal satisfaction at less cost.

A card showing our agents in your vicinity is enclosed. Fill out and mail the blank, and we will send you our sample book showing colors and weights in Benjamin Bond.

Yours very truly,

A collection letter sent early in 1915, when business was slowly recovering from depression. It secured the money.²

DEAR SIR:

Just a line to tell you that we appreciate your efforts to get your account cleaned up. While it isn't coming very fast, we nevertheless are assured that you are putting forth your best efforts.

We are sorry indeed that your collections are no better. But keep pounding away at your debtors systematically and if you have used good judgment in extending credit—and we believe you have—you will come out ahead. We ourselves have found that reminding our debtors persistently and consistently practically always brings results.

Whenever you have a little money to spare, please don't forget us. At present your balance is down to \$112.00. We should like, of course, to get it cleaned up before the end of this month.

¹ McJohnson, *Business Correspondence*, p. 226. New York: The Alexander Hamilton Institute.

² *The Goodyear Correspondent's Manual*, p. 80. Akron, Ohio: Goodyear Rubber Co.

A frank collection letter to a thick-skinned customer.¹

DEAR SIR:

We have received through our agent, Mr. James, your order of October 10 for dry goods, amounting to \$245.

Now, Mr. Wort, as you are well aware, whenever we have had a bill with you of over \$100, we have been compelled to incur the expense of an attorney for collection long after the account was due, and it seems, if we were to fill this order, we should be inviting a repetition of the same trouble.

It is true, you paid our draft for the last bill of about \$50 very promptly, which certainly counts in your favor; but the amount involved at present is several times that sum, and we consider it best to write you and put the matter of payment, in case we ship the goods, up to you frankly, and ask you for some assurance that if we ship, the amount will be paid with reasonable promptness.

We are always willing to help our customers out in a pinch with a little extra time; but we must know the date when we may depend on payment being made before we ship your order. Undoubtedly you will appreciate the fact that it is necessary for us to have this information.

What will you do to satisfy us concerning that point ?

These are good letters. Moreover, they are fairly representative of the letters being sent out today by progressive business houses which have undertaken the systematic training of their correspondents.

The fact that such letters can be turned out day after day by a considerable number of correspondents testifies that the methods of instruction are effective. They succeed somehow in training these young business men to *think*, in affecting their whole attitude of mind. In the case of the Goodyear Rubber Company manual, to take a single instance, a prospective correspondent could hardly work through the twelve "problems" of its one hundred and thirty typed pages without developing some measure of the qualities of tact, heartiness, and shrewdness expressed in every letter. After such training the correspondent can keep up the standard of his output for letter after letter because he has really imbibed the spirit of the house and has mastered the process of expression. The English teacher who examines such a series of letters is likely to enlarge his notions of what can be accomplished through composition instruction.

¹ Gardner, *Effective Business Letters*, p. 152. New York: The Ronald Press Co.

As to suggestions bearing on composition work in schools, these business letters should add strength to the growing tendency to specific assignments in English classes and to emphasis on substance; even for younger students whose composition study is not their main occupation.

I am inclined to think, moreover, that there is a distinct advantage in what might be called the business-letter form itself. A letter built on this plan is the embodiment of definiteness. You are addressing an individual on a matter which touches his practical interests and your own. You must be clear and direct, tactful, circumspect, and concise. Well-devised letter forms, keyed to the actual interests of the members of the class, should be used to good advantage in college and school.

A useful hint toward contriving suitable problems may be found in another feature of these business-letter manuals. Many of their letters are in series, developing a controversy with a difficult customer. It should not be beyond the skill of the teacher to interest two boys in a properly set-up contest.

It may be worth recalling, by the way, that the controversy was a favorite device in the older centuries, when young gentlemen—and young ladies—learned the art of composition mainly through letters addressed to tutors or older friends and duly and keenly criticized. The contest motive seems often to have stirred those old youngsters to definiteness of aim and vigor of presentation even despite the handicap of the stilted epistle “phraseology.” With the vivacious business form, results should certainly be forthcoming.

The letters need not be confined to business subjects, although for the large and increasing number of students in commerce courses commercial letters might be largely used. The essential is that they should be built on the business formula and be practical and definite and concise.

There is another suggestion which connects with the work in oral composition and which seems to be deserving of careful consideration. It is often charged that school courses in oral composition develop fluency at the expense of firmness of texture—the sentences tend to be formless, the language and ideas trivial.

Now all modern business letters are really examples of oral composition; they are not written with the pen, but dictated. The letters in these manuals have very decidedly the quality of talk—the talk of cultivated persons who speak easily though they waste no words. The correspondents evidently think out what they wish to say and then talk it off to a stenographer or to a dictating machine in the words which come. The words come freely; the construction is colloquial; yet the limitation of space seems to support and stimulate the author of a modern business letter in his talk—when he is properly trained—somewhat as it does the writer of a newspaper paragraph or of verse.

Why should not such discipline as this be given to students in our schools? At present, students are exercised only in *public* speaking, speech that is addressed to a roomful. But public speaking of even the most informal sort is less natural and less important than private speaking as found in conversation or in extended talk addressed to an individual. How to devise practicable exercises for conversation is as yet a question, but it seems quite possible to furnish training in talk addressed to an individual or small group, through exercises in dictating letters.

The recording is, of course, less important under the circumstances than the composition, but that also might be managed, in various ways. One way would be to let students work in pairs, one writing from the other's dictation. The actual rate at which business letters are dictated is rarely faster than a quick writer can take down in longhand. A group of words will be spoken quickly, then there will be a pause, then more words, and so on. A business letter is rarely over two hundred and fifty words in length, taking perhaps three or four minutes to dictate. After a little experience the "scribe" will be able to catch most of the words at first hearing—of course if he has a knowledge of shorthand he can get them all—and the chinks can be filled in with a little repetition just as often happens with a stenographer. This practice in accurate fast writing from dictation is itself a valuable thing for the "scribe." And the dictation of the letter, if the exercise is repeated frequently, will do for the high-school student something of what it does for the correspondent in the business house, namely,

exercise him in oral composition which is at the same time easy and concise.¹

Particularly good results will be obtained if the school authorities are wise enough to instal a dictating machine and a typewriter. The first cost is not large, measured in terms of laboratory apparatus, and the possibilities of usefulness are very large. Typing from a dictating machine, "transcribing" as it is called, is not hard to learn and is itself a useful acquirement; the demands for such transcribing typists in business houses far outrun the existing supply.

Even without transcription, however, the records can be used to excellent advantage for criticism of construction and wording, and especially of tone and utterance. The dictating machine offers in fact the best aid I know of for correcting faults of speech. When you hear your voice thus reproduced, you learn for the first time how it sounds to other ears, its defects and its merits alike. You never quite forget after that, and your efforts for improvement are more intelligent.

I hope that many teachers of English may find their way to the Better Business Letters Conference in Akron, Ohio, next fall; they will be greatly profited. And then I hope that some of these alert and thoughtful correspondence supervisors will attend the meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English; they will be profited no less. We are all working at the same problem; we need light, all of us, from every side.

¹ Since writing this I find that Lewis and Hosis's *Practical English for High Schools* recommends such use of dictation. I find also that Mr. Gaston of the Richmond Hill High School, New York City, has been using successfully with his composition classes an exercise very similar to that suggested above. Perhaps others are doing the same.